Ode to a Pot

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> "Beauty is truth, truth beauty,"— that is all
> Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know"
>
> - George Keats

"Being is *what requires creation of us* for us to experience it."[1] I wish I could say that such lofty aspirations guided my decision to register for a class on ceramics the very semester I began my graduate work in philosophy. This enigmatic, often cited quote from Maurice Merleau-Ponty forms the centerpiece of much aesthetic philosophy by Merleau-Ponty scholars. My decision to pursue ceramics did not arise from an awareness of my ontological requirements. I have practiced some form of visual art most of my life, from drawing, painting in watercolors and oils, to sculpture. This interest in practicing art has never exhibited itself in my philosophical writing because the urgency of political concerns has preoccupied my philosophical thinking. This is my first attempt to philosophically explain this separate part of myself.[2]

Art as Practice

I expose myself as grounded in Aristotelian ideas for I decided in my college years that the meaning of life centers on the practices of life. Acknowledging that I cannot control whether my goals will be reached (because fate is whimsical and even my goals may change), I understand that the only thing I can control lies in how I choose to live everyday life. This decision leads me into philosophy because I need to read and think philosophy every day. Likewise, I need to work inside a studio and participate in art-making regularly. I need to practice both.

Ceramics Contra Philosophy

Why ceramics? Three reasons guide my choice into ceramics. I like the contrast with philosophy. For ceramics is *immediately* useful. Bowls, mugs, teapots, platters, and even vases, these items can be put immediately to use. Philosophical ideas, although arguably useful at some point in time, do not provide this experience of immediate practical, material utility. There is something incredibly satisfying in this immediate utility. Marx is profoundly correct that seeing one's work materially present in the world serves as a source of incredible and deep satisfaction. This exhilarating feeling is difficult to experience in the practice of philosophy. The feeling arises perhaps when participating in conferences, perhaps when seeing one's article in print, or perhaps when noticing an idea touch a student. But these experiences of utility with philosophy lack the material manifestation in the world and the opportunity to concretely locate the exact utility. Philosophy's utility lies in a variety of realms—thought, emotion, psychology—but not in a physical realm. This physical lack feels quite unsatisfying. The tactility of the experience of seeing and holding one's pots, of using one's pots, or of seeing others use them provides the materially satisfying sense of being useful in the world.

The satisfying feeling of utility perhaps arises from seeing a finished product, a product that I cannot further tweak, modify, add upon, or edit. Writing philosophy, one constantly faces questions that rise from within oneself and others about aspects of the work where one can clarify an idea, where one can continue to think through the further ramifications of an idea, where one can consider the application of another idea. Even when the work is finally published, one cannot help but consider further questions that arise from within oneself and, with luck, from the criticisms of other philosophers and theorists. The notion of a finished paper is an oxymoron. A pot is different. One cannot fix the pot, once it is glaze-fired. If something feels unsatisfying about this piece, the only consolation lies in avoiding the particular practice in future pots. If one finds the pot satisfying, one learns to appreciate it because hand-made pots cannot be completely replicated. Glaze firing is subject to the uniqueness of the circumstances within the kiln in each firing. One encounters this particular pot as a unique, finished product. Consequently, one experiences the still moment between the finished product and all the decisions to make about the next pot. In writing philosophy papers, I do not feel this still moment because of the never ending quality of writing philosophy.

Lastly, ceramics provides an opportunity to think and act without or outside of words and the weight of the linguistic system. In the ceramics studio, I replace the demand to be more and more articulate through words with thoughts about three-dimensionality: shapes, curves, lines, texture, and design. I still do not understand why certain curves and shapes appeal to the eye. I have been instructed that certain curves "naturally" appeal to human sight. I have heard similar theories in music in regard to overtones, and the order of certain chords that "naturally" appeal to human hearing. But as a political philosopher with specializations in feminist and race theory, such assurances on the "naturalness" of human attraction to curves and order of musical chords do not lie beyond some suspicion. The interstices between nature and culture are far more complex to unquestionably accept the notion of "natural" attractions. Nevertheless, thinking outside of words and instead within the framework of three-dimensionality is both freeing and illusive. In the three-dimensional framework, the seepage of meanings and the affective influences of shapes, curves, lines, etc. are much too clear. I am aware that I do not understand all the ways in which shapes and curves influence me and others who see and hold my pots. I remain persistently surprised at how the feel of a bowl changes with the slightest modifications in its curve. In the persistent effort to achieve clarity that is demanded by the use of language, philosophy forgets the inevitable seepage of ideas, that something necessarily escapes conveying and grasping. Philosophers forget that at any one moment complete understanding is not possible. Perhaps because I work in phenomenology, I have come to be aware in the horizon of pots, how much I cannot control and do not understand the affective influences of shapes, curves, lines, etc. This seepage of meaning both frustrates and inspires.

The Zen of Bowls

I do not practice ceramics making solely as a nice contrast to philosophy. Ceramics making in itself influences the subject I am, the person I am becoming. I locate three influences the practice of ceramics making has upon my subjectivity. First, I love the feel of mud in my hands. In other art mediums a brush, a pencil (in philosophy, the entire structure of language) lies between me and the product; in ceramics, my hands contact and work with mud directly. I touch clay in the palm of my hands, between my fingers, and feel it ooze under the remnants of fingernails and into the crevices of any cuts in my skin. Surprisingly, mud has soothed my cuts and sores. Every potter I speak to shares this pleasure. Nothing quite compares to this sensual feeling that at once evokes play and childhood and still holds forth the promise of yielding utility or/and art.

Second, the temporality of making pots is very different from other forms of art and philosophy. Both motivate being in the present, but in a distinct sense. In painting, sculpture, and philosophy, one must learn patience in attending to the work at hand because of the never-ending quality of the product. Hence a painting or a philosophy paper can take months, if not years, to

finish. One remains forever uncertain if these works are finished. Because the subject decides on the status of the object, a level of uncertainty about the status of the work as finished persists. Such a state inspires, indeed demands, the cultivation of great patience and forever tempts perfectionism. Such temporality requires dwelling in the infinity of the present; in three senses. This present is very difficult to experience; when painting or writing, I must constantly force my attention to return to the process at hand. Writing requires great attention; yet it is difficult to maintain such attention. Second, the present of painting and writing has a repetitive quality, in the attending again and again to the expression of an idea. Finally, the present of painting and writing can at times feel suffocating because the future in which the piece exists as finished feels as if it may never arrive.

Pots motivate a distinguishably different temporality of the present. When throwing pots, one must learn to let go of the piece. Over-handling clay leads to exhausting the clay-body, resulting in the collapse of the piece. Even in glazing, one must learn not to under-apply or over-apply the glaze. One must learn to let go, even when one yearns to touch up a corner or finger a curve. The work decides that it is finished. This temporality emphasizes release, discourages over-attachment to any one piece, and forces one not to focus on the piece as a finished product. This discouragement of over-attachment to any one piece has influenced my temperament profoundly. Such discouragement of attachment encourages accepting, however painfully, that no matter how much care and attention I devote to a single piece, I may never hold it as a finished product. I accept, however reluctantly, that with all the time I dedicate to one piece, this piece may collapse or, after the final firing, still end up on the heap of broken pots. Instead of investing all my expectations in one piece, I have developed an appreciation for the process. Only upon accepting the process of pottery-making, I find peace with such chaos regarding individual pieces, with such consequences beyond my control. Such a demand to let go of control—such a temporality—forces me to dwell in the present and not to focus on a future in which this particular end-product exists. This experience of the present is distinctly different from that of painting and writing. This experience of the present is not repetitive; the present fleets by. Because of the demands of the spinning wheel, one must concentrate on the clay, on steadily holding one's fingers, on evenly exerting pressure on the clay while pulling up or shaping the piece. Any distraction during this period de-centers the piece, creates a wobble, or otherwise exhibits the uneven attention. Because of the speed with which the whole process occurs, one must focus one's attention on the throwing. Maintaining attention during this process does not present a challenge. A pot, no matter what size, can be thrown within thirty minutes, depending on one's skill level. With such speed, I experience the flow of time. In concentrating on the present, in going into the present of throwing pots, one feels the infinity of the present. This infinite feel of the present is far from suffocating because when one finally looks up from the wheel, the present has too easily slipped away.

Third, pottery making is a feminist endeavor. Perhaps because ceramics is historically associated with women, ceramics is considered usually low art, or "craft" and not high art. Much like cooking, although women constitute the majority of potters in studios, the professionals (chefs) consist primarily of men. Perhaps the association with low art arises because pots can have utility and do not simply have aesthetic value. But coming to ceramics from drawing, painting, and sculpture, I must insist that only the practice of ceramics has forced me to think abstractly. With the other mediums I was allowed to wallow in realist, representational art. To learn the high art mediums, students usually initially re-create the "real" world by drawing or painting from reality. As such, I was not initially forced to think abstractly. This may also partly be a result of my disposition, which tends towards structure. With ceramics, even making a simple bowl immediately demands awareness of curvature and shape; immediately demands an abstract sensibility. Three dimensionality, shapes, curves, forms, etc. are, in their fundamentalness and simplicity, abstract. I do not know the history of pottery making and I do not know exactly when this art-form was associated with women. But I want to challenge its status as low art, as just craft. That numerous women practice this art demonstrates that women engage in much abstract creative activity. I practice this art form in defiance of its status as low art and to question the socially constructed designations of low and high art. In making pots, I participate in a feminist engagement. In these three ways, I appreciate how practicing ceramics affects my subjectivity.

Conclusion

As a Merleau-Ponty scholar, I have considered his work on creativity in writing this piece. He writes that the artist creates meaning by uniquely expressing resolutions of certain dualities. I list six dualities of creating here: 1. the expression of what is internal to the artist, while simultaneously reflecting the external world; 2. the relation between the individual and the social; 3. the relation between the real and the imaginary; 4. the relation between matter and form; 5. the relation between the visible and the invisible; and 6. the relation between pure repetition and pure innovation. In creating, the artist brings meaning into the world by depicting a new resolution to these dualities. These enigmatic descriptions of the process of creating do not reflect the actual lived experience of working with clay and glaze, of cultivating strength and habitual movement in my fingers, of developing specific corporeal positions, or just being in the studio. I cannot argue here that perhaps the phenomenologist who endeavored to portray lived experiences does not successfully portray lived aesthetic experiences. Nevertheless, however preliminarily, this position invites speculation. Being in a ceramics studio experientially feels quite removed from these theoretical concepts. Indeed, these theoretical concepts are far from my mind. In the studio, I am simply and only responding to the demands of my pieces and the immediate surroundings of the studio. Sometimes I do not feel even like a thinking being in the studio—but no, I do not want to say quite that. I overwhelmingly feel the call of the piece, an urgent call that does not feel conceptual but rather intuitive and sensual. There must be a relation between the conceptual and the sensual but perhaps the philosopher in me is just beginning to understand it.

Although I concentrate on the contrasts between philosophy and ceramics here, much between the two is similar. Most importantly, there is the impression that there is so much more to philosophy and to ceramics and hence so much more to attempt; they both emanate the distinct feeling of the infinity of possibilities. This open-endedness is at times scary, daunting, and frustrating. But such open-endedness offers the exciting prospect of infinite growth, education, and creative possibility.

Endnotes

1. Maurice Merleau-Ponty. *The Visible and the Invisible, trans. Alphonso Lingis* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1968), 197.
2. I want to thank Sally Scholz for inviting me to express why I continue to throw pots while making a living as a philosopher.